

THE LOUNGER.

[N^o XXIX.]

Saturday, Aug. 20. 1785.

For the LOUNGER.

THE advantages and use of *Biography* have of late been so often mentioned, and are now so universally allowed, that it is needless for any modern author to set them forth. That department of writing, however, has been of late years so much cultivated, that it has fared with biography as with every other art; it has lost much of its dignity in its commonness, and many lives have been presented to the public, from which little instruction or amusement could be drawn. Individuals have been traced in minute and ordinary actions, from which no consequences could arise, but to the private circle of their own families and friends, and in the detail of which we saw no passion excited, no character developed, nothing that should distinguish them from those common occurrences,

“ Which dully took their course, and were forgotten.”

Yet there are few even of those comparatively insignificant lives, in which men of a serious and thinking cast do not feel a certain degree of interest. A pensive mind can trace, in seemingly trivial incidents and common situations, something to feed reflection, and to foster thought; as the solitary naturalist culls the trodden weeds, and discovers, in their form and texture, the principles of vegetative nature. The motive, too, of the relater often helps out the unimportance of his relation; and to the ingenuous and susceptible, there is a feeling not unpleasant in allowing for the partiality of gratitude, and the tediousness of him who recounts his obligations. The virtuous connections of life and of the heart it is always pleasing to trace, even though the objects are neither new nor striking. Like those familiar paintings that shew the inside of cottages, and the exercise of village-duties, such narrations come home to the bosoms of the worthy, who feel the relationship of Virtue, and acknowledge her family where-ever it is found. And perhaps there is a calmer and more placid delight in viewing her amidst these unimportant offices, than when we look up to her invested in the pomp of greatness, and the pride of power.

I have been led to these reflections by an account with which a correspondent has furnished me, of some particulars in the life of an individual, a native of this country, who died a few weeks ago in London, *Mr William Strahan*, Printer to his Majesty. His title to be recorded in a work of this sort, my correspondent argues from a variety of considerations unnecessary to be repeated. One, which applies

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particularly to the public office of the Lounger, I will take the liberty to mention. He was the author of a paper in the *Mirror*; a work in the train of which I am proud to walk, and am glad of an opportunity to plead my relation to it, by inserting the *éloge* (I take that word as custom has sanctified it, without adopting its abstract signification) of one of its writers.

Mr Strahan was born at Edinburgh in the year 1715. His father, who had a small appointment in the customs, gave his son the education which every lad of decent rank then received in a country where the avenues to learning were easy, and open to men of the most moderate circumstances. After having passed through the tuition of a grammar-school, he was put apprentice to a printer; and, when a very young man, removed to a wider sphere in that line of business, and went to follow his trade in London. Sober, diligent, and attentive, while his emoluments were for some time very scanty, he contrived to live rather within than beyond his income; and though he married early, and without such a provision as prudence might have looked for in the establishment of a family, he continued to thrive, and to better his circumstances. This he would often mention as an encouragement to early matrimony, and used to say, that he never had a child born that Providence did not send some increase of income to provide for the increase of his household. With sufficient vigour of mind, he had that happy flow of animal spirits, that is not easily discouraged by unpromising appearances. By him who can look with firmness upon difficulties, their conquest is already half achieved; but the man on whose heart and spirits they lie heavy, will scarcely be able to bear up against their pressure. The forecast of timid, or the disgust of too delicate minds, are very unfortunate attendants for men of business, who, to be successful, must often push improbabilities, and bear with mortifications.

His abilities in his profession, accompanied with perfect integrity and unabating diligence, enabled him, after the first difficulties were overcome, to get on with rapid success. And he was one of the most flourishing men in the trade, when, in the year 1770, he purchased a share of the patent for King's Printer of Mr Eyre, with whom he maintained the most cordial intimacy during all the rest of his life. Besides the emoluments arising from this appointment, as well as from a very extensive private business, he now drew largely from a field which required some degree of speculative sagacity to cultivate; I mean that great literary property which he acquired by purchasing the copyrights of some of the most celebrated authors of the time. In this his liberality kept equal pace with his prudence, and in some cases went perhaps rather beyond it. Never had such rewards been given to the labours of literary men, as now were received from him and his associates in those purchases of copy-rights from authors.

Having now attained the first great object of business, wealth, Mr Strahan looked with a very allowable ambition on the stations of political rank and eminence. Politics had long occupied his active mind, which he had for many years pursued as his favourite amusement, by corresponding on that subject with some of the first characters of the age. Mr Strahan's queries to Dr Franklin in the year 1769, respecting

ing the discontents of the Americans, published in the London Chronicle of 28th July 1778, shew the just conception he entertained of the important consequences of that dispute, and his anxiety as a good subject to investigate, at that early period, the proper means by which their grievances might be removed, and a permanent harmony restored between the two countries. In the year 1775 he was elected a member of parliament for the borough of Malmesbury, in Wiltshire, with a very illustrious colleague, the Hon. C. J. Fox; and in the succeeding parliament, for Wotton Bassett, in the same county. In this station applying himself with that industry which was natural to him, he attended the House with a scrupulous punctuality, and was a useful member. His talents for business acquired the consideration to which they were intitled, and were not unnoticed by the Minister.

In his political connections he was constant to the friends to whom he had first been attached. He was a steady supporter of that party who were turned out of administration in spring 1784, and lost his seat in the House of Commons by the dissolution of parliament with which that change was followed; a situation which he did not show any desire to resume on the return of the new parliament.

One motive for his not wishing a seat in the present parliament, was a feeling of some decline in his health, which had rather suffered from the long sittings and late hours with which the political warfare in the last had been attended. Though without any fixed disease, his strength was visibly declining; and though his spirits survived his strength, yet the vigour and activity of his mind was also considerably impaired. Both continued gradually to decline, till his death, which happened on Saturday the 9th July 1785, in the 71st year of his age.

Endued with much natural sagacity, and an attentive observation of life, he owed his rise to that station of opulence and respect which he attained, rather to his own talents and exertion, than to any accidental occurrence of favourable or fortunate circumstances. His mind, tho' not deeply tinctured with learning, was not uninformed by letters. From a habit of attention to style, he had acquired a considerable portion of critical acuteness in the discernment of its beauties and defects. In one branch of writing himself excelled, I mean the epistolary, in which he not only shewed the precision and clearness of business, but possessed a neatness as well as fluency of expression which I have known few letter-writers to surpass. Letter-writing was one of his favourite amusements; and among his correspondents were men of such eminence and talents as well repaid his endeavours to entertain them. One of these, as we have before mentioned, was the justly celebrated *Dr Franklin*, originally a Printer like Mr Strahan, whose friendship and correspondence he continued to enjoy, notwithstanding the difference of their sentiments in political matters, which often afforded pleasantries, but never mixed any thing acrimonious in their letters. One of the latest he received from his illustrious and venerable friend, contained a humorous Allegory of the state of politics in Britain, drawn from the profession of *Printing*, of which, though the Doctor had quitted the exercise, he had not forgotten the terms.

There are stations of acquired greatness which make men proud to recal the lowness of that from which they rose. The native eminence
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of Franklin's mind was above concealing the humbleness of his origin. Those only who possess no intrinsic elevation are afraid to fully the honours to which accident has reared them, by the recollection of that obscurity whence they spring.

Of this recollection Mr Strahan was rather proud than ashamed; and I have heard those who were disposed to censure him, blame it as a kind of ostentation in which he was weak enough to indulge. But methinks "'tis to consider too curiously, to consider it so." There is a kind of reputation which we may laudably desire, and justly enjoy; and he who is sincere enough to forego the pride of ancestry and of birth, may, without much imputation of vanity, assume the merit of his own elevation.

In that elevation he neither triumphed over the inferiority of those he had left below him, nor forgot the equality in which they had formerly stood. Of their inferiority he did not even remind them, by the ostentation of grandeur, or the parade of wealth. In his house there was none of that faucy train, none of that state or finery, with which the illiberal delight to confound and to dazzle those who may have formerly seen them in less enviable circumstances. No man was more mindful of, or more solicitous to oblige the acquaintance or companions of his early days. The advice which his experience, or the assistance which his purse could afford, he was ready to communicate; and at his table in London every Scotsman found an easy introduction, and every old acquaintance a cordial welcome. This was not merely a virtue of hospitality, or a duty of benevolence with him; he felt it warmly as a sentiment: and that paper in the *Mirror* of which I mentioned him as the author, (the Letter from London in the 94th number), was, I am persuaded, a genuine picture of his feelings on the recollection of those scenes in which his youth had been spent, and of those companions with which it had been associated.

Such of them as still survive him will read the above short account of his life with interest and with pleasure. For others it may not be altogether devoid of entertainment or of use. If among the middling and busy ranks of mankind it can afford an encouragement to the industry of those who are beginning to climb into life, or furnish a lesson of moderation to those who have attained its height; if to the first it may recommend honest industry and sober diligence; if to the latter it may suggest the ties of ancient fellowship, and early connection, which the pride of wealth or of station loses as much dignity as it forgoes satisfaction by refusing to acknowledge; if it shall cheer one hour of despondency or discontent to the young; if it shall save one frown of disdain or of refusal to the unfortunate; the higher and more refined class of my readers will forgive the familiarity of the example, and consider, that it is not from the biography of heroes or of statesmen that instances can be drawn to prompt the conduct of the bulk of mankind, or to excite the useful though less splendid virtues of private and domestic life.

E D I N B U R G H:

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